

The Cleaning Women

My question required sidling up to, the way a maid would ask for a day off. The conversation would be chancy with the white women milling around the yoga studio putting away their props. I could not risk the word *housekeeper*—colored girls in head rags crowded in on the word, mopping, scrubbing, and taking home leftovers. If I broached the subject head-on, these friends-for-now would know by the set of my mouth that I'd been on hands and knees on a white woman's kitchen floor. Their expressions would say that was the proper order of things.

Pottery Barn catalog in hand, I sagged into my couch and put my feet up on the coffee table. When I pushed aside a star-shaped basket, it left a five-pointed dust-free spot. I looked away, but a cobweb strand denounced me, dangling from the middle of the ceiling to a yoga mat unfurled on the floor. Crumbs reproached my bare feet, and the odor of last night's fish-fry skillet indicted my nose.

Get off your lazy butt and clean this place.

I dropped the catalog. Who was I to own monogrammed sheets? Linen napkins would refuse delivery to my address. Silk throw pillows would insist the UPS driver take them up the hill where rich white women hired help.

In the 1940s my grandmother Mon (she'd have me tell you that rhymes with sun) cleaned for white ladies. She spoke of them with fondness and gave up housework only when a better job

came along: high school custodian. Better because it included a pension, and paychecks were regular.

My Mon, a janitor? She owned a grand piano. Black and shiny, it held court in her formal living room—not to be confused with the informal sitting room just off the front porch. Mon’s long brown fingers flew over the keys as she taught me to play *Clair de Lune*. A ruby-hued velvet couch, its back a graceful curve, sat against one wall. An expanse of fleur-de-lis patterned carpet swept across the room to matching chairs on the far side.

My grandmother, a maid? She owned two sets of flatware. Stainless steel in the drawer for everyday, and silver stored inside a wooden chest for Easter and Christmas. Her closets were stuffed with pretty things. Orderly rows of dresses, ankle-strap high heels along the floor, and a fox wrap draped around a hanger.

My grandmother? Scrubbed toilets? Glass bricks formed a wall behind a breakfast nook in her kitchen. When I was a little girl I sat there watching dappled sunlight play on the table, crunching bacon strips she’d set on my plate. She would rest the skillet on an iron trivet—one of a dozen that appeared whenever a hot pan threatened a counter. And on her screened-in front porch—an apple green glider that I set in motion with my big toe, while wind chimes sang to me like angels.

Weekends at Mon’s house were a respite from real life.

Real life lived in Mama’s house. No glider on our front porch. Instead: peeling paint, squeaky floorboards, and a razor strop, which hung by the front door. In real life, the kitchen floor was stamped with footprints ground in by muddy boots. In real life, Mama scuffed around in a shapeless housedress and used-to-be-pink slippers.

Our golden retriever lived in the basement, and even though my brother shoveled droppings off the concrete floor every day, he could never shovel away the stink. When Mama cooked chitlins, the stench clung to walls and furniture and the back of my throat. The smell was almost as bad on the days she boiled mustard greens.

On one of those mustard-green days, while I was playing on my bedroom floor, a dark shape, antenna waving, inched up the inside of my blouse. I screamed, batted at my chest, tore off the blouse, and flung it across the room. I stomped a wad of covers that had fallen off the bed, in case more roaches were hiding in the folds. With all the strength in my skinny arm, I hurled a shoe at the window. The crash of shattering glass was both a shock and a comfort. Why couldn't I live at Mon's?

I was in high school, living with Dad halfway across the country, when I learned Mama cleaned houses too. She rode the bus to and from the suburbs along with the other help. I learned it in the nebulous way that family stories enter one's consciousness. I knew Mama cleaned for white ladies, but didn't want to know it. Especially since she became a maid the same year I realized the provenance of Mon's silver. The set in the pretty wooden box had been a cast-off from one of the women Mon cleaned for. *Give the dull knives to the colored woman, or toss them in the trash. Makes no difference.*

When I learned the truth about Mon's silver, my admiration crusted over into shame.

But by then, the high school years, self-hatred was already crawling up my skin like a roach. *Not good enough* caused me to be reserved, which the girls at my new school mistook for haughtiness. Black girls shouted, "High yellow bitch." I didn't understand "high yellow," but "bitch" was clear enough. Perhaps I began turning inward earlier, at fourteen, in American

history class. On the day we studied slavery, attention leaned in my direction, the other students sneaking a peek at the only black kid in class. While the teacher droned on about half-naked girls on the auction block, I felt the sideways eyes of my classmates determining my price.

After taking an early retirement, I worked part-time assisting seniors who lived independently. One of my clients needed help tidying up her tiny apartment, a mindless chore that appealed to me after decades of climbing the corporate ladder. I liked this soft-spoken white woman the instant she invited me in, with a wave of her hand and an offer of candy from a dish on the coffee table. Such a grandma thing to do. She explained the only way to clean floors was on all fours, an opinion my own experience validated; but as soon as my knees hit the tile, I was seething. *You've got a master's degree, Dawn. What the hell are you doing on this woman's kitchen floor?* I wanted nothing more than to strangle this sweet grandma, and the women who'd given my grandmother gifts, and the women who'd hired my mother, and every other white woman who'd hired help.

I picked up the Pottery Barn catalog and dropped it into the recycle bin in my kitchen. My weariness ground footprints into the linoleum, and the footprints led to shame, and the shame circled back to weariness, which led to chitlins stinking up my peace of mind.

I wanted to live in a house like Mon's, but Mama's was the one I deserved.

When my want nudged past my inadequacy, I Googled "cleaning services in Kansas City." Sifting through the list turned out to be one more chore too big for me to start.

The search had to be narrowed. I'd have to ask someone. The women in my writers' group lived in apartments. My book group? The same. Yoga? My age. Homeowners. A few had grown into what I dared label friends. How long would that last if any of them had actually hired a housekeeper ... although nobody used that word anymore. Well then, if they'd hired a cleaning service. If they were that well off ... although, one was a policeman's wife, and another lived in a house smaller than mine, and another was paying for her mother's nursing home. None of them was rich. Still ... it would be risky to talk with white women about cleaning houses, and if they recommended their cleaning service ...

Jesus, don't let them say, "You'll love her."

Like the acquaintance who had been excited to introduce me to an artist he'd discovered. "Such an inspiration. You'll love him." Like the colleague who'd recommended an author. "Reminds me of you. You'll love her." Thrilled, foolish, each time I clicked the mentioned website. The artist was black. The author, too. And I was the black writer-friend. I waited bitterly for the next betrayal.

Four of us straggled after yoga class, always the same four, unwilling to leave each other's company just yet. My lingering was mixed with hesitation, while I waited for a wisp of courage.

I rolled my mat a turn. "Lynn, you teach all day ..." I patted the edges even. "... yard's gorgeous." I rolled another turn. "How do you keep up your house?"

“Don’t,” she said.

Dee shoved a bolster into the corner. “Me neither.”

Marilyn was at the check-in desk, flipping through an index file, for the card that bore her name. “Clean house? Give up my two-hour walks? Oh, God no. I deserve time for myself.”

I chuckled, pretending to understand “I deserve.”

In the language of my upbringing, words that followed *deserve* were: *to be taken down a notch*. Or: *a good smack*. Or: *a week in your room*. While the syllables were arranging themselves into words, and the words were lining up into a comprehensible sentence, Dee said, “I don’t feel like it anymore.”

I stopped breathing.

Weekends at Mon’s, I had made my bed in the morning and put toys away before supper. If you didn’t feel like putting the toys away, she didn’t feel like letting you play with them again. Did she have feelings about cleaning her house? There were no dirty dishes after she fixed my bacon. The Steinway always gleamed, bench slid underneath, sheet music tucked inside. *The Ottumwa Courier* was the only item allowed out of place, tossed on the foot of her daybed after she worked the crossword puzzle.

I forced a breath deep into my chest. “Dee, your house is spotless. Mine’s a mess.”

She and Marilyn said, “Sarah.”

I waited for *you’ll love her*.

My apprehension drowned out most of the conversation. Snippets sneaked in. “Knows about birds.” “Goes to yoga.” “Like being around her.”

I gulped. “How often does she come?”

“Set your own schedule.”

Hire help. Set the schedule. The power was heady, yet fraught with hazard. Let a stranger into my space, which was so cluttered with self-criticism.

Dee plucked her phone from her purse. “I’m texting you her number.”

Sarah came by to work out an estimate. I opened the door to greet her, and my shoulders eased when I saw she was white. I studied her face for any slight raise of an eyebrow that would betray hesitation at cleaning a black woman’s house.

She had eyes for only the work. She studied grime with a professional detachment—her pace deliberate through the kitchen, bedrooms, and bathrooms. As though wearing white gloves, she brushed the frame of a Van Gogh print above my bed. “I’ll dust the tops of picture frames for you.” *Starry Night* had long ago disappeared from my awareness, but it could not hide from Sarah. It was harboring her enemy—dirt. She paused in the hallway to admire a Tibetan thangka. “Pretty wall hanging.”

I tagged along behind her, a little girl who’d just acquired a fairy godmother. Happy energy swirled in her wake like fireflies around the hem of her gown. Windows were magically thrown open as she passed. Dust bunnies hopped away smiling.

Her presence was a cross breeze airing out my musty insecurities.

Back in the kitchen, she glanced into the backyard. “See that little black bird out by your fence? It’s a junco. He’ll poke around under your feeder, if you sprinkle sunflower seeds on the ground.”

We agreed on a price and then scheduled the job. Mon's trivets, hanging on the wall above my stove, supervised the transaction.

Sarah hugged me goodbye. "Gotta go do my house now."

Clean mine. Clean hers. It was all the same to her, a task to be checked off her list. A client to be added to her customer base. "See you next week."

A white woman was going to clean my house. Mon and Mama chuckled at the notion. Their white ladies chuckled too, because I had hired help—just as they had. My yoga classmates would chuckle in bemusement that *help* was anything other than a solution to a problem. What's the fuss? Dirty house? Call Sarah.

I brushed the nap of my velvet couch. Discovered in an antique store, it might have been a shoestring relative of Mon's sofa, which she had bought with money earned from housework. A cobweb sneaked across the baseboard. (Sarah would make short work of it.) Relaxing in a rocking chair, I wondered if Mama and Mon would have liked fairy godmothers, too. My big toe set the chair in motion—the rhythmic squeak of floor boards like an angel's song.

Sarah hadn't asked where I'd gotten that wall hanging she'd admired. She'd acted as though it's hanging there were perfectly normal. As if I deserved my pretty things.